

# The importance of poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy for an enlisted aviator in the USAF (2000–2004) flying in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom

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*This special issue of Journal of Poetry Therapy focuses on the use of poetry and other forms of expressive writing to explore the transformative experiences of military veterans, and so in this article I discuss how the use of poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy positively influenced my life while I was serving in the United States Air Force (USAF) from 2000 through 2004. This article briefly reviews my reasons for enlisting and discusses the importance that poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy had for me during four different phases of my military history: (i) Basic Military Training, (ii) Aircraft Qualification, Combat Survival, and Water Survival Training, (iii) serving in the post 9/11 operations Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, and (iv) the period after fulfilling my time of service for the USAF. In discussing each phase, I explain the unique challenges that I encountered, how I used poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy to successfully overcome these challenges, point out relevant examples of poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy that were particularly influential, and include pictures of my experiences throughout.*

**Keywords** Poetry; hip-hop; philosophy; therapy; military; USAF

## Introduction

Up until the year that I decided to join the Air Force, enlisting in the armed services had never seriously crossed my mind. But as senior year steadily approached, I started thinking more seriously about how to spend the coming years of my life. Since I was just 17 years old, I still wanted to have fun and explore the world, yet I was also hoping to start laying down a solid foundation for my future life and career.

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My father had served honorably in the US Army when he was about my age, and his choice seemed to have served him well. He told me stories of his adventures and about the many health and educational benefits that servicemen were provided. Of course my mother worried about me joining the military, but then again she also worried about me leaving the house without a jacket or with my hair wet. There was no avoiding the fact that worrying is simply what loving mothers do best, so I assured her that everything would be fine as I dried my hair and set off to talk to the USAF recruiter (for photos see [Figures 1–3](#)).

Upon reflection, the idea of enlisting in the US Air Force struck me as appealing for at least five reasons. First, at that time I was not aware of many serious job opportunities available for 17-year-olds just graduating from high school, and further, my family and I had no money to seriously consider college as my next step. So when I discovered that there were flying jobs available for USAF enlistees I became incredibly intrigued. Flying on airplanes and traveling the world for a living sounded like one of the most exciting and adventurous options available to a teenager with a fresh high school diploma (2000). Surely, I loved growing up in Redondo Beach, California, with its beautiful beaches, weather, people, and richly diverse and



FIGURE 1. Adam and Young Croom (my mother).



FIGURE 2. Adam and Frank Croom (my father).



FIGURE 3. Adam and Blessing Croom (my golden retriever).

artistic culture. Yet I also remained curious to learn more about other people, places, and cultures. Second, as a young man about to embark on a life of my own, I was eager to learn what I was capable of accomplishing—in some sense, to better learn

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50 *who* exactly *I* was—and so there was a desire and motivation inside of me to seek out  
 challenging opportunities to excel among my peers. Third, I wanted to have a real  
 job that would provide me with the financial resources to afford my own car and  
 apartment, as well as health insurance and college tuition later down the road.  
 55 Fourth, serving as an enlisted aviator with “wings” in the USAF was considered an  
 honorable and prestigious profession—one of the very best jobs in the military—so  
 I looked forward to acquiring a respected position in society and contributing to it in  
 some substantive way (for photos see [Figures 4 and 5](#)). Fifth, in almost every military  
 story that I could remember, it seemed that despite differences in detail regarding the  
 different locations and challenges that military servicemen encountered together,  
 60 solid friendships had nonetheless been made throughout them all. Considering that  
 my friends would be what I missed most about high school, flying as part of an  
 aircrew for the USAF seemed like an opportune way to build a new brotherhood of  
 friends (for photo see [Figure 6](#)).

65 In thinking over my military history, I found that I could identify at least four  
 different phases that presented me with unique challenges to overcome, and that  
 I had used poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy to help me overcome each of the unique  
 challenges that I faced throughout these four phases. The first phase of my military  
 history concerns the six weeks that I spent in Basic Military Training (BMT) at  
 Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. The second phase concerns the 52 weeks that  
 70 I spent in more specialized training in (a) Aircraft Qualification training at Sheppard  
 Air Force Base, Texas, as well as Altus Air Force Base, Oklahoma, (b) Combat  
 Survival (SERE **or Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape**) training at Fairchild



FIGURE 4. Adam and President Bill Clinton.





FIGURE 5. Adam and Charles Wilson (my right-hand man throughout training).

Air Force Base, Washington, and (c) Water Survival training at Pensacola Naval Air Station, Florida. The third phase concerns the 146 weeks that I spent as an enlisted aircrew member (Loadmaster) on C-17 cargo jets and serving in support of the post 9/11 operations Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Finally, the last phase concerns my completion of time of service and honorable separation from the USAF in order to pursue a new post-military life as a scholar at the University of Pennsylvania.

Since this special issue of *Journal of Poetry Therapy* focuses not only on the use of poetry in the transformative experiences of military veterans, but further considers the use of other forms of expressive writing in their transformative experiences as well, in this article I further discuss how hip-hop and philosophy, in addition to poetry, **have** helped me to overcome some of the unique challenges that I faced throughout my military career.

Indeed, distinguishing between which works are genuinely “poetic” versus genuinely “philosophical” is unlikely to be one that is based on rigid, consistent, and universally accepted principles. For example, Ludwig Wittgenstein—who is considered by many scholars to be “the greatest philosopher of the 20th century” (Biletzki, 2014)—writes in *Culture and Value* (1980) that “I think I summed up my



FIGURE 6. Survival School.

attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a poetic composition” (p. 24e). In *On the Way to Language* (1971a) Martin Heidegger—who is also “widely acknowledged to be one of the most original and important philosophers of the 20th Century” (Korab-Karpowicz, 2009)—writes of “poetry and thought” that “each needs the other” (p. 70) and even suggested in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971b) that poetry is “the saying of the unconcealedness of what is” (p. 72). As Albert Hofstadter (1971b) explains in the introduction to *Poetry, Language, Thought*, “in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (1935–36) Heidegger had already pointed to the function of poetry as *the founding of truth*: bestowing, grounding, beginning” (p. xii, my emphasis). More recently, Duncan Richter (2011) has argued that since “the history of concepts is the history of the creative, imaginative, rule-bending/creating/breaking use of language [...] it is the history of literature, poetry, or whatever else we might want to call linguistic art,” and that consequently, “philosophy, rightly understood, is a kind of literature or, at least, continuous with literature” (p. 257; for more on poetry and philosophy see also Croom, 2015; Heidegger, 1962, 1971; Wittgenstein, 1953, 1972, 1980, 2001).

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Further, not only is philosophy often considered poetic, but often poetry is also considered philosophical. For instance, Aristotle argued in *Poetics* (1902) that “poetry [...] is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular” (1451b). In discussing the “metaphysical poets” of the **seventeenth century**, including John Donne and George Herbert, Luke Hankins (2011) explained that the metaphysical poetry from this time had been characterized as having “certain stylistic tendencies, such as elaborately

extended metaphor or conceit, fondness for paradox, and linguistic inventiveness and ingenuity (often loosely termed ‘wit’)) (p. 1). “No man could be born a metaphysical poet,” Samuel Johnson popularly noted, “to write on their plan [...] it was at least necessary to read and think” (quoted in Grierson, 1995, p. xxxiii). More recently, Amit Majmudar (2012) also points out in “Two Philosophical Poets” how T. S. Eliot and Kay Ryan wrote particularly philosophical poetry, and in *Three Philosophical Poets*, George Santayana (2013) further discusses the philosophical significance of the poetry composed by Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe.

Further still, not only is the distinction between works that are genuine instances of “poetry” versus genuine instances of “philosophy” unlikely to be one that is based on rigid, consistent, and universally accepted principles, but additionally, the distinction between works that are genuine instances of “poetry” versus genuine instances of “hip-hop” is also unlikely to be one that is based on rigid, consistent, and universally accepted principles. For instance, Walt Whitman wrote about sex and the city while presenting himself as a tough, working man (Diggs, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c) and many hip-hop artists explicitly consider themselves poets—note for example the track “Warrior Poets” on Pep Love’s (2003) *Ascension Side C* as well as Kendrick Lamar’s (2014) recent mix-tape entitled *The Poems of Kendrick Lamar*. Often, hip-hop lyricists’ freestyle either alone or in competition with others in “battles” can serve as rich reservoirs of poetic creativity. Hip-hop artists have also had collections of their poetry edited and published, including for instance Tupac Shakur’s (1999) *The Rose that Grew from Concrete*, which consists of a collection of poetry that he wrote between 1989 and 1991.

Given that great expressive writing is both thoughtful and beautiful, and so may merit being considered both philosophical and poetic, and given that either may discuss themes or be set to sounds associated with hip-hop, throughout this article I will discuss poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy together, since all three were and still are incredibly important forms of expression to me.

## Basic Military Training

Now, the first phase of my military career concerns the six weeks that I spent in BMT in Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. The first major challenge that I encountered in BMT was that this was my first time moving away from my friends and family and living on my own. I was a young man that had spent most of my life growing up in a liberal Redondo Beach, California, but now for the first time I was to spend six consecutive weeks with the 737th Training Group, the mission of which is to “transform civilians into motivated, disciplined warrior airmen with the foundations to serve in the world’s greatest Air Force” (USAF, 2014). Clearly this was going to be far from another day at the beach.

To paint just a brief picture, this “transformation process” that one undergoes during BMT involves six weeks of intense physical, emotional, and intellectual conditioning. A typical day normally begins at 04:45 to the blaring horns of reveille and Tech Sergeant Philips shouting *Get up! Get up! Get up!* At this point, everyone has 15 minutes to jump out of bed, shit-shower-and-shave, get dressed to military



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standards, and fall neatly in formation outside by 05:00 in time for the morning exercise regimen. After an hour of cardiovascular exercise and strength training—which typically includes push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, various other exercises, and at least a one mile run—we again fall into formation and collectively march in step to the chow hall for our morning meal. Throughout the day there are classes to take, equipment to become familiarized with, and other team-building exercises to participate in. At all times, the movements of each trainee are expected to be executed with urgency and precision so that the movement of the entire flight ticks with the seamlessly smooth coordination of a well-crafted watch. Any errors at all in the chow hall or elsewhere were powerfully and publically criticized so as to deter any other deviations from the increasingly coordinated collective we were to become. Our uniforms had to remain pristine at all times without any wrinkles and loose strings, and our boots had to glisten in high definition. More generally, BMT consisted of constantly learning new things at high speed and having to perform them perfectly, all while drill instructors scream at you in their persistent attempt to purify the weak from you and better prepare you for performing under pressure. Make too big of a mistake at any point and a trainee may not only have extra push ups to do or duties to perform but could further get “recycled” or sent back one or more weeks in the program so that the trainee being disciplined would have gone through the process all over again. The constant pressure over a long period could really get to you after a while. But this “transformation process” that one undergoes while in BMT is intended to break you down in order to build you back up in improved form.



FIGURE 7. OEF aircrew.



The goal is not simply to develop a stronger me, but a stronger *we* (for photo see Figure 7).

In order to fuel our morale while in BMT, we were allowed to receive letters from the outside world on occasion. My parents would write to me and send me cards with photos and poems in them (for photos see Figures 1 and 2). This was really the only contact that I had with the outside world at this point, as well as the only source of relaxation I had from the never-ending rituals of military training. So, although basic training is not an ideal place to spend large amounts of leisure time becoming absorbed in the study of poetry and expressive writing, it is surely a great place for one to *open up* to poetry and expressive writing. Surely, most trainees in BMT for the first time have many new feelings and experiences to express. Further, since prior to basic training I was in constant communication with my friends and family in Redondo Beach, there was really no reason to even write letters to other people before this time. So BMT offered me a unique opportunity to seriously engage in the expressive writing of letters for the first time. Moreover, since short poems that were written on or included with the cards that my family sent me often rhymed and were easy to remember, they provided me with new esthetic and intellectual items to rehearse and re-appreciate in my mind while I did other tasks throughout BMT. Throughout this incredibly stressful military episode I could, so to speak, provide myself poetic commercial breaks.

### Aircraft Qualification, Combat Survival, and Water Survival Training

The second phase of my military career concerns the 52 weeks that I spent in more specialized training in (a) Aircraft Qualification training at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas, as well as Altus Air Force Base, Oklahoma, (b) Combat Survival (SERE) training at Fairchild Air Force Base, Washington, and (c) Water Survival training at Pensacola Naval Air Station, Florida. Luckily, at this point in my career I was afforded a lot more freedom than I had before in BMT, somewhat similarly to how students are afforded a lot more intellectual freedom in college than in high school or elementary school. The earlier stages are supposed to provide a more basic and common core set of fundamentals upon which more specialized training can be subsequently established. Now that I had made it through BMT, I would luckily have a bit more free time to read poetry and philosophy (as well as science), but the kind of challenges that I was about to face would be much harder. In this 52-week phase, I would be training to become an enlisted aircrew member and would be awarded my “wings,” which would allow me to start working on airplanes and traveling the world at the age of 18. I was **not only** excited but also a bit nervous, since the washout rate for this program was reported to be at approximately 50%. So the fact of the matter was that half of us that went through BMT in order to have a shot at this program would fail out and be cross-trained to do some other kind of work. Although I think we all play an integral part in the military system, I did **not** enlist in the USAF for the purpose of spending four years of my life working a nonflying position, so I was eager to excel in this course. Here I would have to learn the basics of aircraft safety, operating systems, weight distribution and placement of

cargo, hazardous materials, and mathematical principles for applying restraint to various types of cargo. It was challenging work, but at least I had more time to myself at this point and could read, go to the gym, and listen to music.

Although hip-hop is only rarely discussed in the academic literature or given full credit as an art form (see for example Williams, 2010), a careful assessment of some of the exemplary hip-hop lyricists of our time would clearly show that they possess a robust lexicon, refined sense of rhythm, and a rich reservoir of knowledge regarding poetic conventions and current events. Importantly, hip-hop is a popular medium for discussing current and salient issues of concern—consider for instance how J. Cole (2014) raised awareness regarding the police shooting and killing of Michael Brown AQ5 in his recent song “Be Free” (Grow, 2014; Williams, 2014). In fact, forms of spoken poetry of this kind date back to at least the epics of Homer—which are among the oldest surviving written works of Western civilization—perhaps in part because of the fact that “poems [can] take on the *memoric form* of memory in a wide range of poetic forms from the traditional sonnet, haiku, or villanelle, to a scattered projective verse” (Eby, 2014, p. iii). “Poetry, in its simplest purpose, is a way to record,” Lawrence Eby (2014) writes in *Memoric Form: Poem As Memory*, and “in its details, [it] helps my mind slow life down just enough so that I can remember something when I reread it” (p. 2). Hip-hop then, as a kind of poetry, can be used to help preserve knowledge of culture and tradition through time, as well as raise awareness of and provide a platform for discussing issues of current concern.

At the time that I was in Aircraft Qualification training I was listening to many of the same hip-hop artists that I grew up listening to in Redondo Beach. For example, I had Del the Funky Homosapien’s *Both Sides of the Brain* (2000), Lauryn Hill’s *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998), Method Man and Redman’s *Blackout!* (1999), Jay Z’s *Vol. 2 ... Hard Knock Life* (1998) and *Vol. 3 ... Life and Times of S. Carter* (1999), Bone Thugs-N-Harmony’s *Creepin on ah Come Up* (1994), E. 1999 *Eternal* (1995), and *The Art of War* (1997), Wu-Tang’s *Enter the Wu-Tang* (1993) and *Wu-Tang Forever* (1997), Nas’ *It Was Written* (1996) and *I Am...* (1999), Notorious BIG’s *Ready to Die* (1994) and *Life After Death* (1997), and Tupac Shakur’s *Me Against the World* (1995) and *All Eyez on Me* (1996), and *R U Still Down? [Remember Me]* (1997). Importantly, a common theme or motif that recurs throughout much of hip-hop is the struggle from rags to riches, or overcoming all odds to become successful in one’s chosen area of interest in life (Johnson, 2013), and this is a theme that many of us related to while in military training. Not only does hip-hop have lyrical content that is often highly motivational, it also typically involves the creative use and interpretation of rich and multifaceted metaphors, which frequently encourages further reflection on the topics discussed. As a matter of fact, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) argue in *Metaphors We Live By* that metaphors are not merely tangential to language and cognition more generally but are in fact centrally involved in the grounding or embodiment of language cognition in human activity. Tim Murphy (2001) also argues in *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion* that:

The key to Nietzsche’s view of metaphor is the concept of metaphor as, in German, the act of *übertragung*, of “carrying over,” “transfer,” or “transport.”

Rather than a technical definition of the specific *trope* of metaphor, Nietzsche understands *übertragung* as the basic structure of all cognition and culture. Thus, he extends the concept to encompass humanity's most basic relationship to reality as a whole. (p. xv; see also Nietzsche, 1873/1999)

Furthermore, many hip-hop beats have a stimulating rhythm that one can enjoy as a background soundtrack to late-night study sessions or workout routines, and often these beats or instrumentals helped me to settle into a groove and sharpen my focus.

The small group of us that eventually did make it through Aviation Qualification training were awarded our wings (for photo see Figure 8) and rewarded with the opportunity to endure further punishment at Combat Survival School (SERE) in Fairchild Air Force Base, Washington, in the snowy winter, as well as Water Survival Training in Pensacola, Florida. Given the fact that these were survival courses, I focused exclusively on this during the time (for photos see Figures 9 and 10).

### Serving after 9/11: OEF and OIF

The third phase of my military career concerned the 146 weeks that I spent as an enlisted aviator on C-17 cargo jets (for photos see Figures 2, 11, and 12), for the most part flying in support of the post 9/11 operations OEF and OIF. Now that I had finally completed all of my requisite preparatory training to become an enlisted aircrew member and was awarded my wings, at this stage I was now ready to start flying missions and travel the world. At first the job was a dream. Being a Loadmaster consisted of flying with cargo to different places around the world whenever it was required, and our aircrew would often receive several days off in crew-rest to explore the local areas. I would always buy several new books before going out on missions and spend a great deal of time reading, both in the air during cruise altitude and on the ground while in crew-rest. It is in this third phase of my military career that I was able to really start reading and writing poetry and philosophy especially. And since it was only shortly after I was able to start flying missions that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 occurred, this was going to be the time of my life where I would need poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy the most.

I had the chance to fly to many new locations as an enlisted aircrew member on the Boeing C-17 Globemaster III cargo jet, and having this opportunity to experience new environments and cultures was incredibly awe-inspiring and intellectually stimulating to me. It helped me to cultivate a more open mind about human beings and their various forms of life. Not only was I constantly traveling to new places and meeting new people from different cultures, but the cargo that I would have to load and transport on the C-17 was also always different and unpredictable. For example, I have loaded and transported everything from UH-60 helicopters and special-forces personnel to porta potties, pallets of food, professional cheerleaders, and fire trucks. So, since my task-demands, social settings, and local environments were continuously changing, I had to become a master of adaptability. I found this exciting and challenging and was able to productively cope with the pressure of this work by delving into one of the few crafts flexible enough to pack up and take along with me

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BASIC MILITARY TRAINING STUDENT PERFORMANCE SUMMARY																																											
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LACKLAND AFB FORM 205, APR 98 (CG)

PREVIOUS EDITIONS ARE OBSOLETE

FIGURE 8. Results from Basic Military Training.

on missions: reading and writing. I could not help but be fascinated by the different ideologies that guide the different forms of life of the different people that I had met from around the world, as well as the local geographies and human-made monuments. So, in order to better understand all of the new sensory and conceptual stimulation that I was being exposed to as a flyer, and to make better sense of my own life and the missions I was working to support, I began reading and writing





FIGURE 9. Wings ceremony.



FIGURE 10. Photo of wings.

insatiably. It is interesting to me that those in academia and those in the military are often contrasted in terms of physical and cognitive characteristics, but the hunger and habit that I have for reading and writing now has its origins in the more practical need I had back then to make sense of the many new intellectually and emotionally salient events that I was experiencing.

As I started flying missions into the “box,” especially Afghanistan and Iraq, my stress load became incredible and I had started thinking more about the moral status of my actions as well as those of my comrades, the nature of mortality, and the significance of my time alive (for photo see Figure 8). I read work on religion, atheism, and existentialism, including for instance *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* edited by Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (1998), *Atheism: The Case Against God* by George Smith (1974), *Critiques of God: Making the Case Against Belief in God* edited by Peter Angeles (1997), and *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* by William Barrett (1962). In order to better understand my

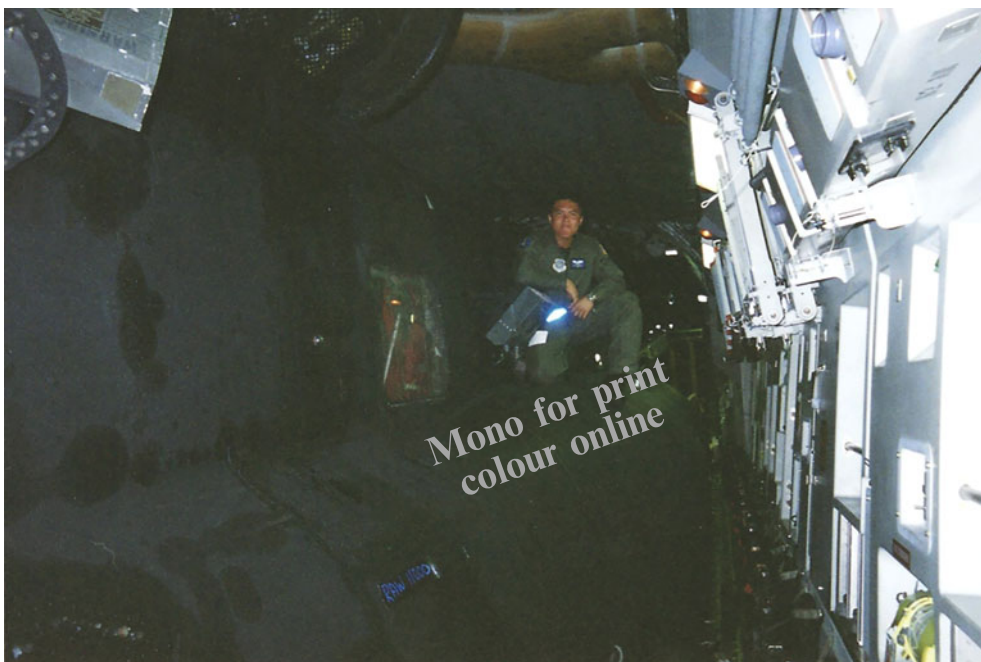


FIGURE 11. Loading a helicopter.

place in the world, I also read work on anthropology, biology, and evolution, including for instance *The Descent of Man* by Charles Darwin (1871/2004), *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* by Robert Wright (1994), and *Human Natures: Genes, Cultures, and the Human Prospect* by Paul Ehrlich (2002). I also thought more about my own ability to inquire into these issues, as well as the nature of the medium (e.g., language) and methodologies (e.g., scientific, philosophical, artistic) for thinking about these issues. So I read books on the nature of knowledge and language, including for instance *Meditations on First Philosophy* by Rene Descartes (1641/1998) and *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* by Steven Pinker (1995). Finally, I also read some fiction, including *The Fountainhead* (1943/1994) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957/1999) by Ayn Rand, as well as works of poetry, including for instance *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman (1855) and *Selected Poems* by Emily Dickinson (1993). Importantly, my turn to poetry and philosophy was not idle or speculative, but urgent and necessary in order to psychologically flourish in the life-threatening conditions that I was facing (for further discussion on poetry and psychological well-being see also Croom, 2015). When I was 18 years old, for example, I had to medically evacuate an 18-year-old soldier in the US Army from out of the box to a better-equipped facility in Germany because he had received a gunshot wound to the head. I still remember looking at him and thinking: here we both are, 18 years old, for all practical purposes cut from the same cookie-cutter human mold, both probably with loving mothers at home just hoping that their son will return home safely. Yet one was soon to receive some very bad news while the other would get yet another gentle call from me calmly



FIGURE 12. Combat ready.

reciting that everything was just fine, like any other normal day at the office. But going through experiences like these can start to initiate a change in a person—indeed, it would be odd if someone were not psychologically influenced by such experiences—and I found that reading and writing poetry and philosophy was an effective way for me to ensure that my transformation would continually be for the better.

Being deployed and away from home so often and for such long periods of time can also make it incredibly difficult to maintain healthy relationships, which was frustrating for me as I tried to make the most of what little time I could spend with my girlfriend. So while deployed I also read books on emotional intelligence and sexual health, including for instance *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ* by Daniel Goleman (2005) and *Great Sex: A Man's Guide to the Secret Principles of Total-Body Sex* by Michael Castleman (2004). But while my romantic relationship was on hold during deployments, I was able to build strong friendships. Spending so much time with the other members of a small aircrew and going through so many unique, interesting, and emotionally salient events encourages the development of great trust and provides a common pool of experiences and perspectives to draw upon in communicating with one another. So the dynamic

and evolving nature of my social relationships with others motivated me to read poetry and philosophy that discussed these issues. Aristotle's work, especially *De Anima* (1993), *Nicomachean Ethics* (1999), and *Politics* (1998), were and still are incredibly important to me, as I am humbled by the scope and systematicity of his thought. As a young flyer serving through three years of combat operations, I had many questions about the nature of human being or life (*De Anima*), how human beings ought to conduct themselves in order to thrive or flourish both at a personal level (*Nicomachean Ethics*) as well as an interpersonal level (*Politics*), and Aristotle offered a wonderfully systematic discussion of exactly these issues throughout his works. Since I learned that Aristotle was also the tutor to Alexander the Great, I appreciated the practical effectiveness that his philosophy was able to exert on the ruling King of Macedon.

Aristotle speaks especially to those involved in combat operations, as he gives a clear and reasoned assessment of how one should act in such situations:

*Nicomachean Ethics*

the most frightening thing is death, for it is a limit [or end], and there seems to be nothing else for the dead, nothing either good or bad. But the courageous man would seem not to be concerned with death in any or every circumstance – for example, death at sea or by way of illness. In what circumstances, then? Or is it in the noblest? Such deaths are those that occur in war, for they happen amid the greatest and noblest danger [...] a courageous man could be said to be someone who is fearless when it comes to a noble death and to any situation that brings death suddenly at hand. What pertains to war is above all of this character. (Aristotle, 1999, 1115a25–1115b)

Aristotle further makes the important point that:

the good will not be good to a greater degree by being eternal either, if in fact whiteness that lasts a long time will not be whiter than that which lasts only a day. (Aristotle, 1999, 1096b)

After reading this I thought that it does not matter so much how long I live but rather how well I live, for to live a blessed life of only one day is to remain blessed nonetheless. I should not fear death then, if the quality of my mark here is eternal.

In fragment 24 (Diels), the ancient philosopher and poet Heraclitus similarly says that “Gods and men honor those who fall in battle (*arèiphatoi*, ‘those who are slain by Ares’)” (Khan, 1981, p. 236) and Charles Khan (1981) writes in *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* that:

The parallel between gods and men recalls LXXXIII (D. 53), where war, as king of all, appoints ‘some as gods, others as men’. It seems likely that the exceptional status of those who die *sur le champ d'honneur* is somehow connected with the fact that the god Ares who destroys them can himself be



identified with King Polemos, the universal power of conflict and opposition.  
(p. 237)

Furthermore, in *Stromateis*, the Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria writes that:

it is not the violence of the death that they recommend, but the fact that he who dies in war is gone without fear of dying, cut off from the body, and without previous sickness and debility in the soul, which men suffer in diseases. For then they depart in a womanly way and longing to live on. For this reason they release the soul in no pure (*καθαράν*) state, but carrying its desires with it like weights of lead—except some among them who have become notable concerning virtue. And there are some too who die in war with desires still upon them; their state in no way differs from that of wasting away by disease. (IV, 14, quoted in Kirk, 1949, p. 393–393)

If I must die and I have no choice about this, it is in some sense psychologically unhealthy to constantly live in fear of this inevitability. What one should be concerned with first and foremost then is the *quality of life* rather than *quantity of life*, which may involve living a *shorter time as a warrior* rather than a *longer time as a coward*. It is preferable, therefore, to die—or to release the soul, as some say—in a *pure state of mind* rather than an *impure* one (e.g., as one does “with desires still upon them” or in “wasting away by disease”).

Similar themes can also be found in the lyrics of hip-hop artist Tupac Shakur. For instance, Tupac also speaks to those involved in combat operations in the following lyrics taken from *Death Around the Corner* (1995), *Ambitionz az a Ridah* (1996), and *If I Die 2Nite* (1995):

### Death Around the Corner

this is for all the real mothafuckin niggas out there,  
I know you ain't scared to die,  
we all gotta go, ya know,  
a real motherfucker will pick the time he goes,  
and make sure he handles his motherfuckin business (Shakur, 1995)

### Ambitionz az a Ridah

thuggin for life and if you right then nigga die for it,  
let them other brothers try, at least you tried for it,  
when it's time to die be a man and pick the way you leave (Shakur, 1996)

## If I Die 2nite

A coward dies a thousand deaths, a soldier dies but once (Shakur, 1995)

For Tupac a *real man* (also often referred to as a *true G*, *thug*, or *soldier*) is one that does not live the life crippled by the constant fear of death, which prevents him from speaking forthrightly and taking the chances requisite to become successful in life. For insofar as one is coward, in contrast with a real soldier, one fails to maximize their life-potential a thousand times before the actual end of their existence, and so in this sense they “die a thousand deaths.” Rather than constantly perishing from defeats of this kind, Shakur urges his audience that if they believe in the rightness of their actions then they should commit themselves to those actions, even if death may come as a result (“if you right then nigga die for it” and “when it’s time to die be a man and pick the way you leave”). As ancient philosophers and poets have noted before, Tupac similarly points out that everyone must die, so this is a fact of reality to embrace rather than live in crippling fear of. Accordingly, the proper way for each person to embrace this reality of mortality is to pick a cause that one genuinely believes in and then to commit to that cause without being weakened or defeated by the fear of death (or peer pressure, etc.). Acting in this way without fear of death or peer pressure is what it means to have an independent mind, to be free, and to keep it real.

In *Cuss Control* James O’Connor (2000) says of the use of taboo words that “It’s the sign of a weak vocabulary” (p. 80) and so some sympathetic to this view have criticized hip-hop for its common use of taboo words (Williams, 2010). Yet it is nonetheless important to remain cognizant of the fact that the use of expressive terms (*fuck*) in the lyrics of hip-hop albums or the titles of published articles in linguistics journals are often linguistically *apt* insofar as the purpose of the speaker or writer is to indicate their heightened emotional state toward the relevant topic of discussion. For instance, two articles published in the 2007 issue of *Theoretical Linguistics* on expressive language were entitled “Really Fucking Brilliant” (Geurts, 2007) and “I Like That Damn Paper” (Zimmermann, 2007; both in response to the influential article “The Expressive Dimension” by Chris Potts) and as Chris Potts (2008) points out in “The Pragmatics of Conventional Implicature and Expressive Content”

As speakers we have strong expectations that uses of [expressives such as *fuck* or] *damn* will correlate with the speaker’s being in a heightened emotional state (or wishing to create that impression). In turn, we use it only when we are in such a state (or wish to create that impression). The total effect of these assumptions is that [an expressive such as *fuck* or] *damn* is a reliable signal of emotionality. Knowing its use conditions [...] largely involves being attuned to this information. (p. 13)

Also, in “The Reappropriation of Stigmatizing Labels,” Galinsky et al. (2013) conducted 10 empirical studies on the appropriation of slurs to test its potential effects on speakers and listeners empirically, and what they found was that *self-identifying with slurs* rather than *being targeted with slurs by others* can actually *weaken*

their stigmatizing force (p. 2020; see also Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2011, 2013, 2014; Galinsky et al., 2003). Bianchi (2014) for instance points out that “targeted members or groups may appropriate their own slurs for nonderogatory purposes, in order to demarcate the group, and show a sense of intimacy and solidarity” (p. 37), and the hip-hop lyricist Talib Kweli has previously explained, “Our community has been using the word [*nigger*] and trying to redefine the context of it for a long time” and “the fact of the matter is that there’s a large segment of black people who grew up hearing the word intended as nothing but love” (quoted in Echegoyen, 2006). So by forgoing careful consideration of expressive terms and the nonderogatory in-group use of slurs, writers such as James O’Connor (2000) and Thomas Williams (2010) that criticize hip-hop for its common use of taboo words have failed to appreciate the important point that slurs are often flexibly employed such that they may also, at least in some restricted contexts, be used nonderogatorily to convey affiliation among in-group members, or to diminish the derogatory force that the slur had originally carried. As Norman Denzin (2001) has correctly pointed out, “The meanings of any given racial terms can change, as when ‘black’ became a signifier of pride as a result of the Black Power movement of the 1960s” (p. 246; see also Croom, 2014).

Finally, in addition to finding inspiration from the work of philosophers and hip-hop artists, I also found particular interest in the metaphysical poets of the **seventeenth** century, with some of the poems by John Donne and George Herbert striking me as especially powerful and relevant. The poem “Virtue” by George Herbert (1633), for example, also speaks to those involved in military combat operations:

### Virtue

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
 The bridal of the earth and sky;  
 The dew shall weep thy fall to-night,  
 For thou must die.  
 Sweet rose, whose hue angry and brave  
 Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye;  
 Thy root is ever in its grave,  
 And thou must die.  
 Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,  
 A box where sweets compacted lie;  
 My music shows ye have your closes,  
 And all must die.  
 Only a sweet and virtuous soul,  
 Like season’d timber, never gives;  
 But though the whole world turn to coal,  
 Then chiefly lives.

The sonnet “Death, **Be Not Proud**,” by John Donne (1633/2011), also powerfully expresses a view that is both esthetically pleasing and practically useful for those serving in war.

### Death, Be Not Proud

530 Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
535 Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
540 And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

545 Although points of contrast can be drawn between these examples of poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy, I think it is sufficiently clear now that they come together in providing servicemen and servicewomen with courage and insight to serve honorably in times of war or in the face of death (or even peer pressure) more generally.

550 At the time that I was flying combat missions in support of OEF and OIF I not only started *reading* poetry and philosophy insatiably, in addition to this, I started *writing* poetry and philosophy insatiably also. Encountering so many new episodes of extreme joy—like returning home to my friends and girlfriend after a long trip away, or crew-resting in exotic locales including Diego Garcia and Pattaya Bay (for photo see [Figure 13](#))—as well as encountering so many new episodes of extreme pain—like  
555 being deployed at the time that my dog Blessing passed away—provided me with a rich and varied collection of experiences to work on clarifying and optimally express. Personally, I found that writing poems about both positive and negative experiences in my life helped me to process these events psychologically and further served as intellectual stimulation as I tried (and continuously re-tried) out various combina-  
560 tions of words, imagery, rhyme schemes, and the like. Often, but not always, I would write to a beat or instrumental playing in the background, as this would help my flow of words to start pouring out. In this way, the process of poetic writing shares a family resemblance, if not identity, with hip-hop. And again, both can be philosophically significant and life changing.

565 In fact, I found that writing about painful experiences in a constructive way could have a powerfully therapeutic or uplifting effect. Importantly, when one writes about painful life experiences and something of merit is produced from this—a beautiful poem, for instance—one can look back and realize that the poem could not



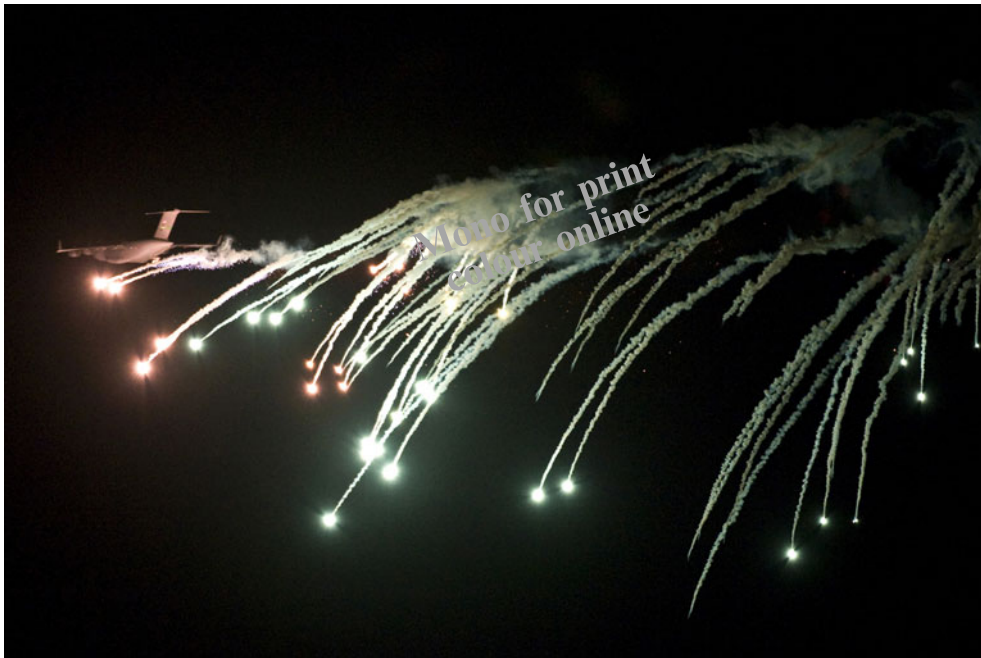


FIGURE 13. C-17 deploying flares. This image was released by the United States Air Force with the ID 111116-F-KX404-920 and is in the public domain.

have been written without that painful life experience serving as expressive fuel or motivation in the first place. Think of all the beautiful poetry that the world would have missed out on if not a single human heart had ever been broken. This is not to say that one should necessarily go out and start breaking hearts to give birth to more poets, but rather to point to the fact that poetry and expressive writing more generally affords us the opportunity to make something uniquely beautiful even out of these painful life experiences. So where a painful life experience may have seemed pointless or unfair before (e.g., in the form of a “why me?” interrogation) at least now it can be seen as serving an essentially productive purpose in the creation of something beautiful. In this way, I found and continue to find the practice of expressive writing deeply transformative and rewarding.

### **After completing my time of service for the USAF**

The fourth and final phase of my military career concerns the period after I completed my time of service for the USAF. Since reading and writing poetry and philosophy had become such an important part of my life, after completing my time of service and honorably separating from the USAF I decided to use the educational benefits (MGIB) that I earned as a serviceman in order to pursue an academic career. So I continued on to study linguistics, philosophy, and psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as poetry at Harvard. Now I have published peer-reviewed articles in scholarly journals across six academic fields, including linguistics,



FIGURE 14. Crew-resting in Pattaya Bay, Thailand.

AQ9

martial arts, music, philosophy, poetry, and psychology and continue to appreciate hip-hip music (especially J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar at the moment).

Certainly, the thought of returning back to school can be intimidating to anyone returning back after a hiatus of some time. I know the feeling all too well, since I had to transition from flying combat operations in the USAF to studying as a full-time Ivy League student at the University of Pennsylvania. But if serving as an enlisted aircrew member for the **USAF** had taught me anything, it was to be adaptable, and that I could trust in my training and hard work to overcome any obstacle. And if poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy had taught me anything, it was that I could make something intelligible, inspiring, and even beautiful out of both positive and negative life experiences.

## Conclusion

This special issue of *Journal of Poetry Therapy* focuses on the use of poetry and other forms of expressive writing to explore the transformative experiences of military veterans, and so in this article I discussed how the use of poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy positively influenced my life while I was serving in the **USAF** from 2000

through 2004. This article briefly reviewed my reasons for enlisting and discussed the importance that poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy had for me during four different phases of my military history: (i) BMT, (ii) Aircraft Qualification, Combat Survival, and Water Survival Training, (iii) serving in the post 9/11 operations OEF and OIF, and (iv) the period after fulfilling my time of service for the USAF. In discussing each phase, I explained the unique challenges that I encountered, how I used poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy to successfully overcome these challenges, pointed out relevant examples of poetry, hip-hop, and philosophy that were particularly influential, and included pictures of my experiences throughout.

## Acknowledgments

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